
“Go Suck Your Husband’s
Sugarcane!”

Hijras and the Use of Sexual Insult

KIRA HALL

And always, licensed and provocative, hanging around the stalls, like a decayed reminder of Lucknow’s past, were the transvestites and eunuchs of the ghetto, in women’s clothes and with cheap jewelry, making lewd jokes and begging: the darkness of the sexual urge finding this ritual, semi-grotesque, safe public expression.

· V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*

Marginalized both socially and spatially, the *hijras*¹ have created an elaborate network that spans all of India, establishing a divergent social space that both parallels and opposes organizations of gender in the dichotomous system that excludes them. Discussed variously in the anthropological literature as “transvestites,” “eunuchs,” “hermaphrodites,” and even “a third sex,”² most of India’s hijras were raised as boys before taking up residence in one of the many hijra communities that exist in almost every region of India. In addition to appropriating feminine dress and mannerisms, many hijras take male partners and choose to undergo a ritualized castration and penectomy operation. Although relatively untouched by police jurisdiction, hijras across the country have divided themselves according to municipal police divisions, in accordance with the demarcation of districts in mainstream society. They elect their own council of elders to settle group disputes, referred to as *pancāyats*, who rule over a select group of hijra communities within a particular region. They have regional meetings as well: simply through word of mouth, tens of thousands of hijras have been known to converge on a single area. Hijras in North India can now travel free of charge on government trains,³ knowing upon arrival in any new city precisely where to go for hijra company. The extraordinary factor at work here is that the estimated 1.2 million hijras now living in India (*Hindustan Times* 1994; Shrivastav 1986)⁴ constitute a culture so diverse that all of India’s myriad social and lin-

guistic groupings are represented within their numbers, and yet they are easily identified as part of one group by what might be referred to as a flamboyant and subversive semiotic system—a system identified through unique choices of dress, gesture, and discourse.

A number of European and American anthropologists have pointed to the existence of this network as evidence that a greater social tolerance of gender variance exists in India than in the West (see, for example, Bullough and Bullough 1993; Nanda 1990, 1992), but I argue instead that this network exists only because the hijras have created it in resistance to systematic exclusion. Ostracized by friends and family, the hijras have formed a parallel universe of sorts, its strength demonstrated by the hijras' loyal participation in local, regional, and national celebrations. Meetings that have won the attention of Indian journalists during the last two decades include the 1979 celebration in Ahmedabad for the 50th anniversary of a hijra named "Dada Guru" Shankar (*Times of India* 1979); a subsequent celebration in Panipat for the coronation of a successor to the Delhi *takia* (Mohan 1979); the 1981 All-India Hijra Conference in Agra, which is said to have brought together more than 50,000 hijras from throughout India and Pakistan (Singh 1982); the religious festival associated with the city of Koovagam, Tamil Nadu, where approximately 10,000 hijras gather on an annual basis to "marry" Aravan, the legendary husband of a female incarnation of Krishna (Shetty 1990); and the annual jamboree at the village of Bechrapi, Gujarat, where hijras gather in mass to pay homage to their goddess, Bahucara Mata (Mitra 1984).

Likewise, it is the network, not the government, that is ultimately responsible for a number of landmark political decisions during the past fifty years regarding hijra rights in India and Pakistan. Some of the most notable gains for the hijra community include the 1936 decision to give hijras government pensions, ration cards, and the right to vote (Shrivastav 1986),⁵ the 1952 and 1977 decisions to allow hijras to run for local office as women (Singh 1982), the decision in the 1950s to lift Ayub Khan's ban on hijra activities in Pakistan (Naqvi and Mujtaba 1992), and the 1994 decision to give hijras the right to vote as women in upcoming elections (*Hindustan Times* 1994). These gains were made only after lengthy protest from the hijra network, a fact not lost on the journalists and the sociologists who report them. Chandar Mohan, for instance, in his article titled "The Ambiguous Sex on the War-Path," offers a brief history of political platforms adopted by the hijras, mentioning in particular stances taken at two influential national conferences in 1969: an All-India Hijra Conference at Nadiad, where participating hijras demanded to be counted as females instead of males in the national census (Mohan 1979; Singh 1982), and a subsequent conference in Bhopal, where the hijras, who gain most of their income by singing and dancing at birth celebrations, launched an organized campaign against the anti-procreation stance of government-sponsored "family planning" (Mohan 1979; Singh 1982).

Indeed, the hijras have strategically exploited their perceived status as "neither men nor women" in their own campaigns for political office. Two events in particular exemplify this strategy: One took place in Gonda, India, in the late 1970s, the

other in Abbottabad, Pakistan, after the collapse of the Benazir Bhutto government in the 1990s. In Gonda, the hijras urged President N. Sanjiva Reddy to invite them to form a government, arguing that as “neutralists” they would be able to serve the nation without the ingroup fighting typical of “men and women” (Mohan 1979); in Abbottabad, the hijras argued that because both “men and women” had failed as politicians, residents should try sponsoring a hijra instead (Naqvi and Mujtaba 1992). Credit for the visibility of the hijra in modern-day thinking, then, is perhaps best given to the hijras who participate actively in this network and who employ in-your-face tactics at public gatherings in order to make their positions heard. Hijras are not accorded respect in contemporary Indian society; they demand it.

In this chapter, I discuss how the hijras reclaim space normally unavailable to them through the use of verbal insult, a discursive practice that both accentuates and constructs the same sexual ambiguity for which they are feared. I begin by tracing the formation of a cultural ideology regarding the hijras’ “verbal insolence,” as evidenced in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of court eunuchs by European travelers, in nineteenth-century discussions of the hijras by British colonialists, and in contemporary portrayals of the hijras by South Asian journalists, poets, and novelists. I then move on to an analysis of the hijras’ contemporary cursing strategies, referring to fieldwork I conducted with Veronica O’Donovan among four Hindi-speaking hijra communities in Banaras, India, during 1992 and 1993. I focus in particular on an ingroup speech event that the hijras perform in the presence of nonhijra outsiders. By employing what some Indian sociologists have named *asliḥ evam dviarthī bhāṣā* ‘obscene and double-meaning language’ (Singh 1982), the hijras are able to assume a position of control in their interactions with the public, inviting their nonhijra listeners to enter a linguistic space that questions dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. Mapping their own sexual ambiguity onto linguistic ambiguity, India’s hijras are able to locate themselves on an otherwise inaccessible social grid.

A History of Verbal Insolence

As a means of contextualizing the hijras’ present-day social position as well as their use of verbal insults, I want first to offer a brief historical overview of the social and linguistic position of the “castrated eunuch” in India. Throughout their various incarnations in history, India’s eunuchs have been portrayed as providers of verbal as well as sexual relief: as overseers of the king’s harem in the fourth century B.C.E.; as “shampooers” in the Hindu courts during the second and fifth centuries; as protectors of the royal ladies of the harem in medieval Hindu courts; as administrators under the Khiljis of Delhi during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; as servants in the Mughal courts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries; as slaves in the houses of Muslim nobility in Awadh (formerly called Oude) during the 1900s; and, finally, as the independent performers variously known since the early nineteenth century as *khojas*, *khusras*, *pavaiyas*, and *hijras*.⁶

Licentious tongues: The court eunuch in European travelogues

The eunuchs of the Mughal court, often referred to as *khwajas* in colonialist literature, are a very different entity from the hijras of the twentieth century, but because many of today's hijras conceptualize themselves as descendants of these earlier court eunuchs, frequently rattling off folk legends about sharp-tongued eunuch administrators, they merit attention here. The eunuchs' predilection for abusive language is documented in the literature over a span of several centuries, particularly in European travelogues. The lively stories narrated by the Italian physician Niccolao Manucci in the mid-1600s about his interactions with various eunuchs during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb provide some rather colorful examples. In his lengthy *Storia do Mogor* (translated by Irvine 1907), Manucci relates several stories regarding what he calls "that sort of brute" known as the eunuch, describing his greed, his vanity, and, most significant in terms of the present discussion, his "licentious tongue":

Another of their qualities is to be friendly to women and inimical to men, which may be from envy, knowing what they have been deprived of. The tongue and the hands of these baboons act together, being most licentious in examining everything, both goods and women, coming into the palace; they are foul in speech, and fond of silly stories. Among all the Mahomedans they are ordinarily the strictest observers of the faith, although I knew some who did not fail to drink their little drop, and were fond of wine. These men are the spies for everything that goes on in secret, whereby they are always listening among the kings, princes, queens, and princesses. Fidā'e Khān, of whom I have spoken, aware of the character of these monsters, did not allow such to be employed in his house, although he retained two young men who acted as pages; he was indifferent to the fact that this sort of people are kept in the houses of princes and great men. This suffices for a brief notice of what the eunuchs are. (Manucci 1907: v. 2, 80–81)

The author's depiction of court eunuchs as "foul in speech and fond of silly stories" and as "spies for everything that goes on in secret" is significant, particularly as it reflects a perspective characteristic of narratives on the eunuch during the next three centuries.

Many of the stories told by Manucci portray the eunuch as a child wronged, rendered angry and miserable by an unwanted castration. Especially moving in this regard is a narrative about the faithful Daulat, who carried the bones of his deceased master 'Ali Mardān Khān all the way to Persia in order to bury them in the tomb of his forefathers, only to have his nose and ears cut off by the King of Persia in return (v. 2, 215–16). Hiding away in a house in Lahore full of shame, the deformed Daulat asks Manucci to make his nose and ears grow again, thinking that as a physician Manucci might be able to conjure a remedy. When Daulat finally comes to terms with the fact that there is no remedy for his deformity, he exclaims: "I know not what sins I have committed to be made an out-and-out eunuch twice over, first in my inferior part, and, secondly, in my upper half. Now there is nothing more to deprive me of, nor do I fear anything

but losing my head itself" (v.2, 216–17). Yet in many of the stories told by Manucci, the eunuch will do anything in his power to revenge himself against his deprivation, as in the case of I'tibār Khan, a eunuch who figures prominently in Manucci's *Storio*. Sold into Mughal slavery at a very young age by his Hindu parents and bitter because of it, the "immeasurably stingy" I'tibār Khan takes great delight in helping Aurangzeb make his father, the elderly Shāhjahān, unconditionally miserable (v. 2, 76–77).

Of particular interest in Manucci's travelogue is a short narrative focusing on an unnamed "insolent" underling, a gatekeeper to Prince Shāh 'Ālam's seraglio, who tricks the author into giving away his money through a verbal slur on his family (v. 4, 225). It is not clear whether Manucci, even after recalling this exchange for his travelogue, recognizes that he has been duped, but the eunuch in question was clearly in control of the conversational encounter. After drawing blood from the prince Shāh 'Ālam, Manucci was given 400 rupees in payment, certainly a great sum of money in the seventeenth century. But when Manucci went to leave the seraglio, a eunuch at the gate remarked off the cuff: "It seems to me that you could never have had as much money in all your life." The statement was immediately interpreted as an insult by Manucci, the proud and prosperous son of a chief physician of the King of Spain. "At once I took the salver and emptied out on the ground all the money in it in the presence of the gatekeepers," Manucci angrily recalls, "telling them I made them a present of it. Then I turned to the eunuch: 'Do you not know that I am the son of the chief physician of the King of Spain, who is lord over half the world and owns the mines of silver?'" (225). Manucci appears to think that he is the winner in this dispute, but the verbal adroitness of his interlocutor cannot go unnoticed; the insolent eunuch, after all, became 400 rupees richer.

According to early accounts, many of the eunuchs who served the Mughal emperors were either kidnapped or sold into slavery by their Indian parents; others were brought from Ethiopia, Egypt, or Sudan as part of the Middle Eastern slave trade. Rajaram Narayan Saletore (1974, 1978) gives perhaps the most comprehensive historical account of the institution of eunuch slavery in India, although there are innumerable references to the practice in the memoirs of various Mughal rulers and European travelers. Francois Bernier (1891), for instance, a French physician in the court of the "Great Mogol" Shah Jahan during the seventeenth century, records one instance when the Ethiopian King sent the court "twenty-five choice slaves, nine or ten of whom were of a tender age and in a state to be made eunuchs. This was, to be sure, an appropriate donation from a Christian to a Prince!" (1891: 135). The practice apparently extended well into the mid-nineteenth century in certain areas of India: William Knighton (1855) identifies the eunuchs as "slaves" in his narrative on the household of Nussir-u-Deen, the King of Oude, and Richard Francis Burton (1886–1888, v. 1, 70–2n), who campaigned against the practice of slavery in general and took it upon himself to trace the development of pederasty in the Eastern world, provides an explicit account of the castration operation used on abductees from Darfur (i.e., "The parts are swept off by a single cut of a razor, a tube (tin or wooden) is set in the urethra, the wound is cauterised with boiling oil, and the patient planted in a fresh dunghill. His diet

is milk; and if under puberty, he often survives").⁷ The subject of court eunuchs in Indian history merits a full book in its own right; I mention it here as a means of contextualizing present-day ideologies about the hijras' language use.

Certain eunuchs, both before and during the Mughal period, did indeed rise to high positions in the royal courts, as suggested by several journalists and anthropologists when discussing the comparatively low status of hijras in modern-day society (e.g., *New Orleans Times Picayune* 1994; Claiborne 1983; Nanda 1990; Sharma 1984; Naqvi and Mujtaba 1992).⁸ Their impotence was said to make them especially faithful servants, and some of them apparently became influential in court politics; these included Malik Kāfir, Ala-ud-din Khilji's favorite eunuch, who led the annexation of Gujarat in 1297 and a raid on southern India in 1310 (see Rawlinson 1952: 226–27; Saletore 1974: 202); I'tibār Khan, who in the 1600s remained one of Aurangzeb's most trusted servants (as reported by Manucci); and Khwaja Saras Hilal, appointed in Agra as one of Sai'd Khan's 1200 eunuchs, who later joined the Emperor Jahangir and named the town Hilalabad after himself (see Saletore 1974: 203). Yet behind all these sporadic tales of valor is the awareness that the eunuch is an orphaned servant, and an emasculated one at that, who exists without family or genealogy. This point is made especially clear in one of Manucci's narratives, in which he gives an eyewitness account of how I'tibār Khan reacted to two elderly visitors from Bengal who claimed to be his parents. After surmising that their claim was indeed true, I'tibār Khan angrily ordered them to receive fifty lashes and cried: "How have ye the great temerity to come into my presence after you have consumed the price of my body, and having been the cause, by emasculating me, of depriving me of the greatest pleasures attainable in this world? Of what use are riches to me, having no sons to whom I could leave them? Since you were so cruel as to sell your own blood, let not my auditors think it strange if I betray anger against you" (v. 2, 78–79).

Yet it is this very emasculation that allowed I'tibār Khan to become the gossiping governor of Aurangzeb's fortress, whose physiognomy, in the words of Manucci, betrayed the "vileness of his soul" (v. 2, 77). The eunuchs, in the minds of many European travelers, were thought to lead a contradictory existence: Their emasculation made them faithful, but their orphanhood made them cruel. Bernier, when reporting on a eunuch rebellion in Delhi provoked by an outgroup murder of one of the seraglio eunuchs, articulates this contradiction overtly:

It seems nevertheless to be the general opinion that he cannot long escape the power and malice of the eunuchs. Emasculation, say the *Indians*, produces a different effect upon men than upon the brute creation; it renders the latter gentle and tractable; but who is the eunuch, they ask, that is not vicious, arrogant, and cruel? It is in vain to deny, however, that many among them are exceedingly faithful, generous, and brave. (Bernier 1891: 131–32)

Bernier's comparison of the court eunuch with "the brute creation," a phrase that when used in this context conjures the image of a male bullock feminized through castration, is telling, particularly as it points to several assumptions shared by European travelers regarding the "humanity" (or lack thereof) of the eunuch. In

many of the Europeans' travel accounts, the hijras exist somewhere between the categories of man and beast, of man and woman, a liminality captured in Manucci's more direct categorizations of the eunuch as "that sort of brute." Because of their neutered status, many Mughal eunuchs served as protectors of the palace women; indeed, in many cases they were the only "nonwomen" allowed into the women's quarters. But their association with feminine secrets won them simultaneous notoriety as court gossips, and cruel ones at that. Bernier, later in his travelogue, describes the procession of the seraglio in Agra and Delhi, in which the participating women were protected on all sides by eunuchs: "Woe to any unlucky cavalier, however exalted in rank, who, meeting the procession, is found too near. Nothing can exceed the insolence of the tribes of eunuchs and footmen which he has to encounter, and they eagerly avail themselves of any such opportunity to beat a man in the most unmerciful manner" (373).⁹ The author's repeated uses of the term *insolence* (formed from the Latin *in* 'not' + *solere* 'to be accustomed to') serves to characterize the hijra as someone who is 'out of the usual', in voice as well as deed. As in the descriptions quoted here, travel reports of the court eunuch frequently conflate verbal insolence with physical cruelty, portraying the eunuch as inhumanely adept at both.

Verbal abominations: The hijra in colonialist narratives

The historical connection between the *kbwaja* of the Mughal courts and the *hijra* of contemporary India is unclear. During the early 1800s, the status allotted to the court eunuch was mapped linguistically onto the "natural" hijra; that is, the term *kboja*, a derivative of *kbwaja*, came to represent "hermaphrodites" in addition to court eunuchs, and both were defined in opposition to the more vulgar, artificially created *hijra* (see Ebdon 1855: 522; Russel, Bahadur, and Lal 1916: 206).¹⁰ Later in the same century, the more prestigious term *kboja* was, for the most part, lost on Hindi-speaking society, and natural eunuchs as well as castrated eunuchs were conflated under the single term *hijra*. But the perception of the emasculated orphan as "insolent" remained constant, continuing through reports made by British colonialists in the 1800s, who systematically objected to the hijras' vulgar manner of acquiring alms at births and weddings. Indeed, Lawrence W. Preston (1987), in his revealing discussion of the role of British colonialists in the oppression of the hijras in the nineteenth century, explains that the vulgarity associated with the hijras' begging techniques, particularly their predilection for verbal obscenity and genital exposure, led the Collector at Pune to direct an edict against its realization. The Bombay Presidency ultimately denied the Collector's request for legislation on the grounds that education, not law, would eventually solve the problem, but it nevertheless declared itself in support of the sentiment behind the request: "No doubt . . . the evil will soon be mitigated, as far as it is susceptible of remedy in the present state of society, and that it will ere long altogether cease to exist, even in respect of the infatuated victims themselves, as other abominations have done under the advantages of education, and under a Government which will not tolerate them" (Webb 1837, quoted in Preston 1977: 379).

The hijras' verbal "abominations" continued to be central to colonialist narratives throughout the late 1800s. John Shortt (1873: 406), in his report on the *ko-jahs* of southern India (a term he uses for both natural and castrated eunuchs), identifies them as "persistent [and] impudent beggars, rude and vulgar in the extreme, singing filthy, obscene, and abusive songs"¹¹; Fazl Lutfullah (1875: 95), in a short discussion of the hijras in Ahmedabad, refers to their "obstreperous sallies of witty abuse"¹²; and F. L. Faridi (1899: 22), in his entry on the Gujarat *hijdas* for the *Bombay Gazetteer*, remarks on their "indecent clamour and gesture." In a manner echoic of Bernier two centuries before him, Faridi exclaims: "Woe betide the wight who opposes the demands of a Hijda. The whole rank and file of the local fraternity [will] besiege his house."¹³

Contemporary Accounts

The designation of the hijra as a loose-tongued upstart has continued to the present day, although it is now Indian journalists and sociologists who carry on this descriptive genre. Authors frequently point to the hijras' idiosyncratic and non-conforming use of language, particularly to their mixing of feminine and masculine speech styles, as indicative of both gender dysphoria and sexual perversion. They contrast hijras with women by referring to the hijras' lewd jokes, their love of excessive obscenity, and their aggressive conversational style; they contrast them with men by referring to the hijras' penchant for gossip and their tendency to chatter excessively, to babble without content. Like the court eunuch described by Manucci in the 1600s, the hijra is portrayed as a foul-mouthed gossip; her dual nature, in the opinion of modern-day Indian authors, enables her to outdo the most negative verbal stereotypes associated with either side of the gender divide.

The work of Govind Singh, the author of a popular study entitled *Hijrō kā Sansār* (The world of the hijras),¹⁴ is but one example of this descriptive trend. Throughout his book, Singh portrays the hijra as a linguistically conflicted entity who, as he explains in the two excerpts reproduced here, shifts between positions of coquettish cursing and foul-mouthed flirting:

When several hijras are together, they can never shut up. Even the hijra who lives alone can never be quiet. Some Don Juan will tease him, and with a clap he'll turn around and give him a quick answer. This answer is often very foul-mouthed and obscene. Hijras, together or alone, always speak and converse in this way. They can be identified by their effeminate gestures in a crowd of hundreds and even from a long way off, and moreover, their style of speaking is just as peculiar.

They keep a storehouse of obscene words and they use metaphors that will shock all of those listening. The use of obscene words in Banaras is singularly unique and exceptional, but when face-to-face with the vocabulary of the hijras, Banaras speech pales in comparison. No one can keep up with the rhythms of the hijras' obscene pronunciations. On any particular day one of them might get angry at another hijra. When a hijra gets angry, he usually gesticulates in a coquettish manner and flares up. He is not

bent upon exchanging blows or serious mischief, but the hijra can't remain silent either. He will certainly begin to rave and babble. When they want something from someone in a crowd, they'll gossip about that man. (1982: 94–95, my translation)

In these passages, Singh employs certain Hindi terms that work together to portray the hijra's existence as linguistically troubling. In interactions with both the public and her own community, the hijra rebels against cultural ideologies of gendered language, assuming a linguistic position that is neither fully feminine nor fully masculine. She appropriates the masculine through her use of *kahā-sunī* 'verbal impropriety,' *garmāgarmi* 'heated verbal exchange,' and *apsabd* 'abusive words'; her speech is *phūbar* 'coarse-grained' and *asīl* 'obscene, vulgar.' Conversely, she appropriates the feminine through her use of effeminate *hāv-bhāv* 'gestures', as well as through her tendency to *maṭkānā* 'move in a coquettish manner' and *baknā* 'babble', 'chatter', 'make disjointed utterances.' The hijra, in the opinion of Singh, is a kind of a linguistic maverick, and her refusal to adhere to hegemonic notions of either feminine or masculine speech becomes almost an instantiation of her refusal to adhere to a particular gender.

Cursing as a corollary of impotence

The hijras' use of obscenity tends to interest commentators far more than their use of gossip; Indian journalists often devote full paragraphs to the hijras' abusive displays, not just at birth performances but also in their daily interactions with innocent bystanders. The hijras' strategy of shouting obscenities in front of outsiders appears to be just one contemporary realization of what has been traditionally identified as "the hijra curse." Since the early 1800s, and perhaps long before that, people in a variety of Indian communities have believed that the hijra, by virtue of her own impotence, has the power to prevent the birth of male children; her curse has therefore been viewed as a performative in the canonical Austinian sense, which, if uttered in the context of the birth celebration, serves to interrupt the family lineage. Because this belief is still extant in many communities, particularly in Indian villages, the hijras often provoke fear among their clients.

Rupa,¹⁵ who shares a house with an Indian family in Banaras and considers herself to be the *pandit* 'priest' of the hijras living in the city, expands on this point. She explains that Banaras residents, fearing the pronouncement of a curse like "may your child die," will respond to the hijras with *izzat* 'honor', 'respect':

They're very afraid of us. If someone has a child and we go to their door, they'll always talk to us with folded hands—whenever they talk to us. Why do they talk to us like that? Because they're afraid that something bad might come out of our mouths. And sometimes that really brings its fruits. They're afraid that we'll say something absurd, for example, *jā, terā baccā mar jāy!* 'may your child die!'. We say that sometimes in anger. And because they're always afraid that their child might die, they'll say, "Don't ever say anything to them, because if something bad comes out of their mouths, something bad will happen to us!" So they always have fear in their hearts, and they always speak to us with respect. (personal communication, Rupa, Spring 1993, my translation)

But because this respect is motivated by fear, the hijras are situated precariously in the social structure. Even though many residents, as Rupa explains, still fear the curse of the hijra, an increasing number of Hindus and Muslims are angered at the hijras' manner of inspiring fear to collect alms, and they dismiss belief in the hijras' power over impotency as mere superstition. The modern-day hijra is left with little choice but to up the verbal ante with a sexual chip. And so it is that P. N. Pimply and S. K. Sharma (1985: 41) depict the hijras as "making overtures to on-lookers" and "cracking sexually charged jokes at men"; Kavitha Shetty (1990: 52) describes them as "intimidating those who are wary of their queer appearance and outrageous behaviour"; and Nauman Naqvi and Hasan Mujtaba (1992: 89) focus on a hijra in Mazimabad who "hurl[ed] the most vociferous abuses" so that a man was "forced to disembark from the bus in shame."¹⁶ Indeed, the United States Department of State (1992: 1–2) even commented on the hijras' use of sexual insult when officials answered a request for an advisory opinion on an asylum application made by a Pakistani "hermaphrodite."¹⁷ Referring to information obtained from the United States embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, the Department informed the San Francisco Asylum Unit of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service that "[the hijras'] performances, despite the fact that they often involve crude sexual jokes, are considered more socially acceptable than real female dancers (who more often than not are also prostitutes)."

The hijras' predilection for obscenity has led a number of researchers, particularly those interested in the human psyche, to theorize on its psychological origins. Gautam N. Allahbadia and Nilesh Shah, who identify the hijras' collective existence as a "subhuman life," pose this question directly in their introduction to a brief article on the hijras in Bombay:

The style of begging is very aggressive. In groups of three or four they confront individuals, clapping and making gestures with their fingers. Give them money and they will bless you and your family and pray for increased libido for you and for male heirs for your family. Refusal is followed by abuse, and obscene gestures, and some of them will lift their petticoats, exposing their genitals and cursing. . . . Why do they live like this? (Allahbadia & Shah 1992: 48)

While Allahbadia and Shah, for the most part, shy away from answering the question of "why," other researchers have tackled it head on, including Sumant Mehta, writing half a century ago, who offered a sociological explanation for the hijras' "indecent gestures" and "mincing and inviting gait": "It is not merely the lewdness which revolts," he explains, "but the fact that the Indian Society has so degraded and inhumanised these people that, without actually meaning to invite an unnatural sex intercourse, these people behave as lewdness-loving people expect them to behave, just in order to earn a pi[e]ce or two" (1945–1946: 47–48).¹⁸

But Mehta goes on to attribute the hijras' behavior (which he variously identifies as "malevolent," "unscrupulous," and "abased") to both the "inferiority complex" and the "resentment complex" (51), a claim more in sync with contemporary explanations. Satish Kumar Sharma, who conducted extensive research on the hijra community in the 1980s, works from the standpoint of Freudian psychology

and links the hijras' sexual overtures to their "feeling of deprivation at the psychological level" (1984: 387). He is concerned less with the societal marginalization spoken of by Mehta than with the hijras' inability to perform sexual acts, a state that, in his opinion, logically leads to the use of obscene language:

An interesting feature of eunuchs is that they pass on sexual overtures to the general population, especially to the males. Why do they do so? The enquiries revealed that though they are biologically incapable of performing sex, yet when they see couples in the society at large, they have a feeling of deprivation at the psychological level. The idea of sex and their imagination of performing sexual acts is gratified by passing sexual remarks, etc., on others. They do not have any physical sexual urge, but sex invades their mind. Thus they, in majority of the cases interviewed, have frustration of an unusual kind, i.e., no physical urge but psychologically they think of enjoying sex. This frustration, as revealed by some of the eunuchs, leads to the practice of sodomy, etc. (Sharma 1984: 387)

Sharma's claim that the hijras compensate for their own impotence by "passing sexual remarks" demands further investigation. There is a long-standing folk association in northern India of foul language with sexual frustration; the work of many popular psychologists builds on the notion that a lack of sexual virility results in verbal degeneration. One need only turn to the scores of popular works on Indian sexuality to see the pervasiveness of this association. Dayanand Verma's (1971) *An Intimate Study of Sex Behaviour* offers but one example. In a chapter titled "Male Superiority by Sex Capacity," Verma attributes the verbal practices of both "name-calling" and "eve-teasing" to male impotency, explaining that a man who uses foul language "at least [proves] that he is potent and can have sexual relations with a number of women" (75). Verma is concerned primarily with the male employment of insult terms like "father-in-law" or "brother-in-law," which if used out of a sanctioned context imply that the speaker has had sexual relations with the addressee's mother or sister, respectively (see V. Vatuk 1969: 275). "A man's main asset is his virility," Verma proclaims, "if a man has all other qualities like courage, patience, etc., but is impotent, that is, he is incapable of having sexual intercourse, he isn't worth being called a man" (74). By calling other men "brother-in-law" and "father-in-law," as well as by speaking sexually to women, the impotent man will "declare his manliness" and hence save face: "What he wishes to convey by narrating such incidents is—'Now at last you should believe that I am not impotent. I possess in abundance the main quality of manliness, namely a wolfish hunger for women. I may not be brave, courageous or patient but I can certainly handle a woman in bed. Whenever you want, I can furnish proof of this quality of mine'" (76).¹⁹

The connection between impotence and foul language is again expressed, albeit from a feminist perspective, by Mayah Balse (1976) in *The Indian Female: Attitude towards Sex*, apparently written as a companion piece to Jitendra Tuli's (1976) *The Indian Male: Attitude Towards Sex*. The book is replete with personal accounts of marriages that failed because of male impotence, among them that of Roopa, who had the misfortune of having an arranged marriage with an impotent

man who sported a “deformed sex organ,” and Sheila, who had to live without sex because she was married to a homosexual. To set the stage for these and other accounts like them, Balse hypothesizes about a group of men who in a cowardly way left their wives on a sinking ship only to find themselves on a deserted island. Titrilling her narrative “A Male Dominated Society” followed by a question mark, Balse points out that without women, men would be doomed to procreative impotence:

Know why women were the protected sex? Know why men always stood on sinking ships or “burning decks” and shouted: “Women and children first?” Know why they battled those urges to jump into the first available life-boat and make for dry land?

Men were bothered about the survival of the race. Suppose the ship went down with all the helpless women on board while the men swam merrily to shore, what would happen?

For a time the men would look at each other and cluck sympathetically. Then they would wring their hands, scratch their heads and say: “You don’t say it’s an inhabited island!” Next day they would sigh: “Oh for a woman!”

Then tell dirty jokes. Or become homosexuals.

It would not matter very much if it were only a question of sex. But the question of progeny made it a grave matter. Those men were doomed. It meant their race would end there.

Although Balse does not specifically mention the hijras in this passage, her suggestion that isolation ultimately provokes men to “tell dirty jokes” or turn to homosexuality echoes the opinion of Sharma, who asserts that impotence causes the hijra to utter sexual remarks and to engage in sodomy. The image of the impotent man as a shipwrecked entity, lost in a world of reproducing heterosexuals, is also telling. The “question of progeny” referred to by Balse is precisely what distinguishes a hijra from a nonhijra—her inability to carry on the family lineage results in a life of social marginalization.

A few American and European anthropologists have also connected the hijras’ language use with their sexual confusion, frequently conflating the two as similar instances of perversion. Harriet Ronken Lynton and Mohini Rajan (1974), in their short introduction to the hijras in Hyderabad, are a case in point. Reminiscent of Singh’s and Sharma’s analyses of the hijra’s use of obscenity, the authors draw a causal link between the hijras’ “manner of speech” and what they perceive to be the hijras’ self-motivated withdrawal from the rest of society:

The self-mutilation of these impotent wretches and their acceptance into the Hijra community is a kind of allegory of suicide and rebirth, while their manner of speech suggests a yearning for identity and identification with a social group. So together they have built a world for themselves. In Hyderabad, as in most of India, people are addressed less often by name than by the title which shows their precise status and relationship within the extended family. So also with the Hijras, with the added detail that the confusion of their terminology is a constant reminder of the sexual confusion which brought them into the group. (1974: 192)

While Lynton and Rajan are not referring to the hijras' obscene language per se, their description is in a way reminiscent of Balse's portrayal of the impotent man as shipwrecked. The terms *self-mutilation* and *suicide* imply that the hijras voluntarily choose to leave the "normal" world of women and men in order to be reborn into the "abnormal" hijra world—a world that, in the opinion of these authors as well as of many other social theorists, is identified by linguistic as well as sexual ambiguity. Isolation leads to a need for what M. D. Vyas and Yogesh Shingala (1987: 89) identify as "vicarious gratification"; many hijras can achieve sexual satisfaction, in the authors' opinion, only by *talking* about the "normal sex life" of men and women.

Hijra as an abusive epithet

Hijras do not have the corner on the Indian obscenity market; a variety of communities are notorious for breaking expectations of linguistic purity. These communities include, but are certainly not limited to, children in Western Uttar Pradesh who invoke a "triad of sex, shit, and sadism" in play-group humor (Vatuk 1969); female singers of *gāli* songs in Eastern Uttar Pradesh who provide ritualized entertainment at weddings (Henry 1976); Oriya-speaking male "charioteers" at the Bhubaneswar Chariot Festival who chant sexually obscene limericks and songs to the devotees of Lord Lingaraj (Freeman 1978); and Rajastani village women who at annual festivals and life cycle celebrations sing of sexual engagement with spouses and lovers (Raheja and Gold 1994). But what sets the hijras apart from these communities is the fact that obscenity is critical to the hijras' own survival. The Hindi-speaking hijras I spoke with in Banaras see their use of verbal insult not as a logical consequence of a self-motivated withdrawal from society but as a necessary survival technique in a society that enforces their marginalization.

In this sense, the hijras' curse is comparable to that of the Hindu widow who, because of the extremity of her marginalization, is given free range to defy the social order through her language use. This point is made clear in Shivarama Karanth's novel *Mukajji*: The novel's main character is a widow who, in many ways, is the most powerful woman in her village.²⁰ Since she has already suffered the worst curse possible, namely widowhood, she has nothing to lose if the other villagers curse her back; the other villagers, afraid of her curse, try desperately to remain on her good side. The hijra and the widow have much in common in this respect; not only are both of these unmarried states considered to be a curse, but the words for *widow* and *hijra* in a variety of Indian languages are considered curses in themselves. M. N. Srinavas's observation more than half a century ago that "the worst word of abuse in the Kannada vocabulary is to call a woman, married or unmarried, a widow" (1942: 117) points to the pervasiveness of *widow* as derogatory epithet, his words reminiscent of the well-known Hindi proverb *rāḍ se pare kōi gāli nahī* (there is no curse greater than calling someone a widow). But to call a nonhijra a hijra is no minor transgression either, especially since it implies that the addressee is sexually impotent and therefore incapable of continuing the family lineage.

Nanda (1990: 14) incorrectly states that the word *hijrā*, unlike its Telegu and

Tamil counterparts *kojja* and *pottai*, is “rarely used” as a derogatory term in Hindi; in fact, its employment as such has been well recorded since the 1940s, when Mehta (1945–1946: 52) wrote that “timid people are often abused as ‘Hijadā’ in Gujarat.” Mitra (1983: 25) implies that the term is used throughout India in reference to more “effeminate” men, in a way that is perhaps comparable to the use of *faggot*, *fairy*, or even *sissy* in contemporary American slang (i.e., “Even before turning into a eunuch, a passive homosexual in Gujarat would be referred to as a *hijra*. This is also true of the rest of India”). Alyssa Ayres (1992), who also notes the prevalence of this epithet in her research among hijras in Gujarat,²¹ suggests that the term is used among nonhijra men as part of a “male-bonding” ritual, in a manner that approximates the use of *homo* among the American heterosexual men discussed by James Armstrong (this volume).

The use of *hijra* as a derogatory epithet is affirmed by the hijras I spoke with in Banaras, who explained how they were repeatedly dubbed *hijra* when young because of their fondness for dolls and other girls’ games. In the commentary reproduced here, Sulekha, a thirty-eight-year-old hijra who now lives with a male partner in a small village outside of Banaras, recalls how her childhood peers rejected her with the label *hijra*, refusing to allow her into their gendered playgroups:

There were a few boys at my school who I used to study with. When I sat with them, they used to tell me that I was a hijra. Then they started telling other people, “This is a hijra! This is a hijra! Don’t sit near him! Sit separately!” If I sat with the girls, the girls would say, “This is a hijra! This is a hijra! Don’t sit near him! Sit separately!” So I felt very ashamed. I thought, “How is it that I’ve become a hijra? The girls don’t talk to me; the boys don’t talk to me. What terrible thing has happened to me?” I wanted to go and play with them, but nobody wanted to play with me. So life was going like that. Nobody would help me. (personal communication, Sulekha, Spring 1993, my translation)

The story of the reaction of Sulekha’s peers to her interest in girls’ activities (e.g., dancing and playing with dolls) is reminiscent of a narrative that appears in Bapsi Sidhwa’s (1992) novel *The Crow Eaters*, written in English. When the father, Freddy, discovers that his son, Yadzi, has been writing love poetry (an enterprise Freddy categorizes as “emasculated gibberish”), he angrily pronounces him a *eunuch*. “If you must think and act like a eunuch,” Freddy exclaims “in a cold rage,” “Why don’t you wear your sister’s bangles?”²²

Sulekha’s distress at the use of *hijra* as an epithet is echoed by Charu, a hijra who lives with three other hijras in a small Muslim-identified community on the outskirts of Banaras. In the passage reproduced here, Charu explains how difficult it is for a hijra to return home to her family after joining a hijra community, encapsulating society’s disgust in the final two lines by referring to their use of the epithet “*E HIJRA! e hijrā!*” (HEY HIJRA! Hey hijra!)²³

hijrā cāhē, (1.5) apne ghar par calā jāe - vah sambhav nahī hai. iske- ye hijrā ke jariye hai- dekhiye samāj, aur aśamāj kā bāt hai. (2.0) aśamāj ho gayā- alag ho gayā, - agar ye jānā cāhēnge, - hijrā jānā cāhēnge, - parivār vāle nārāz hōge. (1.0) khus bhī hōge, (2.5) khus bhī hōge ((softly)) ki ye hamārā parivār hai, (1.5) hamārā beṭā hai, - yā

hamārā larḳā hai, - yā hamārā bhāī hai. ā gayā royēge. - magar ek cīz kā nārāzīgī āyegā, duniyā vāle bolēge ki "uphu. ye hijrā ā gayā. (1.5) iske ghar hijrā ātā jātā hai. - isse hijrā kā ristā hai. - iske ghar śādī nahī karēge." (3.0) to ye duniyā ne asamājīk banā diya. (2.5) duniyā burī nazar se dekhne lagā. (2.5) "E HIJRĀ, (2.0) e hijrā."

(Even if the hijra wants to go home, it wouldn't be possible. The hijra is the dividing line—you see, it's a matter of social versus asocial. He has become asocial. If they want to go [back into society]—if the hijras want to go [back], the family members will get very upset. They'll also be happy—they'll also be happy [and think], "He's our family; he's our child; he's our son; he's our brother." But even though they might cry when he arrives, they'll still be angry about one thing: The worldly people will say, "Oh no! A hijra has come here! A hijra visits that household, so they must be related to a hijra! We won't arrange a marriage with anyone in that household!" So the world has made him an outcast; the world has looked at him with an evil eye: "HEY HIJRA! Hey, hijra!")

The family is, after all, what distinguishes the hijra from most other members of Indian society, who are intimately involved in the extended families so instrumental to social organization. But since the hijra is thought to act as a curse on this very family structure—a belief based on the idea that her impotence will spread to her siblings and prohibit procreation (see, for example, Mehta 1945–1946: 27; Vyas & Shingala 1987: 75; Pimpley & Sharma 1985: 42; Sharma 1989: 51–59)—she is, in the words of Sulekha, a "black spot," an existence that brings shame to the family's potency. It is perhaps this fact that leads Charu to describe the hijras as occupying the dividing line between society and nonsociety: If they were to cross this line by returning home, their appearance would be met with anger, fear, even hatred.

Recent employments of the term in derogatory reference to the Muslim community by the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party, commonly referred to as the BJP, suggests that *hijra* is used as a derogatory epithet more generally. In Anand Patwardhan's 1994 documentary *Father, Son, and Holy War*, to name but one example, a female BJP leader says scathingly of the now former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, *ek hijre par golī kyō bekār ki jāye* 'Why would you want to waste a bullet on a hijra?' Indeed, some Hindi poets and novelists have used the term metaphorically to suggest the ineffectiveness of the referent in question, including the Hindi poet Ved Prakash Vatuk in a number of political critiques (1977a, 1977b, 1987, 1995), such as in his poem *maīne āj isā ko marte hue dekhā* 'Today I saw Jesus dying' (1977a), when he identifies India as a country of *pacpan karor hijre* '550 million hijras'.²⁴ Khushwant Singh similarly exploits this metaphor in his novel *Delhi* in order to indicate the ineffectiveness of his narrator (who, incidentally, has an extended affair with a hijra named Bhagmati): "I was disowned by the Hindus and shunned by my own wife. I was exploited by the Muslims who disdained my company. Indeed I was like a *hijda* who was neither one thing nor another but could be misused by everyone" (1989: 55).

The notion of shamelessness

Both hijras and widows, then, are perceived to be outside the reproducing heterosexual mainstream, and because death would be a more welcome existence than life for those in such an unfortunate state, or so mainstream society thinks at any rate, the destitute have nothing to lose through verbal defiance. As illustrated by a well-known epithet from Kabir (दुर्बल को न सताडये, जाकी मोटी हाय, बिना जीव की स्वास से, लोह भसम हो जाय 'Do not torment the weak, their sigh is heavy; Breath from a bellows can reduce iron to ashes', the sigh of the weak, or in this case their "voice," is thought to have the power to destroy the lives of those situated higher in the social hierarchy. Central to the hijras' narratives is the idea that because their existence is merely tangential to the world of women and men, they are a people without *sarm* 'shame'; that is, a people freed from the constraints of decency that regulate the rest of society. Sulekha identifies the lack of *sarm* not only as the primary trait that distinguishes hijras from women but also as the motivating factor behind their use of obscenity:

We just speak from the mouth. Hijras aren't counted [in the polls] as women, after all. Hijras are just hijras, and women are just women. If there's a woman, she'll at least have a little *sarm* ['shame']. But compared to the hijras, how open can a woman be? No matter how openly a woman walks, she'll still have a little *sarm*. But hijras are just hijras. They have no *sarm*. They'll say whatever they have to say. (personal communication, Sulekha, Spring 1993, my translation)

Sulekha considers her own status to be so low that she is completely outside the social order, a fact that gives her free range to defy the propriety associated with caste and class affiliation through her language use. Several anthropologists report similar observations from hijras in other communities. G. Morris Carstairs, for instance, notes that the hijras in the community he studied "had the security of knowing that they had no vestige of dignity or social position to maintain; and their shamelessness made people reluctant to provoke their obscene retaliation in public" (1956: 60–61). Likewise, Nanda remarks that the hijras she worked with in South India, "as a group at the lowest end of the Indian social hierarchy, and having no ordinary social position to maintain within that hierarchy . . . are 'freed from the restraints of decency' and they know that their shamelessness makes people—not all, but surely most—reluctant to provoke them in a public confrontation" (1990: 51).²⁵ Like the Hausa-speaking Muslim 'yan daudu studied by Rudolph Gaudio (this volume), who as "men who act like women" are said to be shameless in their employments of sacreligious proverbs, the hijras push their hearers to the verbal limit, leaving them with no other choice but to pay the requested alms.

The fear of hijra shamelessness is nicely articulated by the Hindi novelist Shani (1984) in his book *Sāre Dukhiyā Jamnā Pār*. When describing his frustration with the city of Delhi, the narrator refers to an incident involving hijras, who arrive at his door unexpectedly and demand an *inām* 'reward'. Although the narrator initially refuses to succumb to the hijras' requests, their *gāliyō kī bauchār* 'shower of abuses' is too much even for him. When they threaten to expose themselves in

front of onlooking neighbors, he is compelled to pay the requested 51 rupees in order to preserve his *izzat*:

The first day in Mayur Vihar, the night somehow passed and morning came. But it was a very strange morning; as soon as it arrived, it seemed that evening had begun. I hadn't yet finished my morning tea, when someone rang the bell. The door opened, and I heard the sound of bells, clapping, dancing, and singing, and, behind that, the sound of drums. They were hijras. They came to get their reward. Reward? What for? You've come to a new house. House? Whose house? We're just renters; go find the owner. We were answered with louder claps, faster drum beats; we were showered with curses instead of songs. When we protested, they began to strip naked, and in a few minutes there was such a spectacle in front of our gate that all of the people in the neighborhood came to their windows and doors. If you care about your honor, please quietly give them whatever they demand and get rid of them, even though you know you're being blackmailed.

We paid them 51 rupees and got rid of them, even though we knew that if someone asked us what we celebrated, we would have nothing to say. (Shani 1984: 64–65, my translation)

Shani's account is paralleled by a diary entry written by Vatuk (1985), who recalls an actual incident in which the hijras came to his door in Meerut: *hijre āte haī. ve beśarm haī. unki koī izzat nahī ve kiśi ke prati uttardāyī nahī. unki zabān par koī niyamtraṇ nahī. atab ve bar avasthā mē vijyī haī* 'The hijras came. They are shameless. They have no honor. They are answerable to no one. Their tongue has no restraint. They are victorious in every exchange'.

Contemporary Cursing Strategies

Yet both of these accounts, written from a nonhijra perspective, are not particularly flattering. Sulekha offers a different perspective on the hijras' begging technique at birth celebrations, discussing it as a strategy for survival. Also concerned with the notion of *izzat*, she explains that the hijras use obscenity during their performances as a means of reclaiming respect:

Suppose you went to sing and dance somewhere and people didn't show you any respect, or they didn't give you money. Then you'd curse them and they'd be afraid of you, right? They'd be afraid of the hijras?

Yes, yes, yes! . . . Yes, yes, yes, yes. If they don't give us money, we'll feel sad in our hearts. So we'll swear at them, we'll curse them, we'll wish them evil, we'll cut them down to size.

Does society give hijras a lot of respect, then?

Yes, a lot of them do.

So how do you feel about that? Do you like it?

If they give hijras respect, we feel good. If they don't give hijras respect, we feel bad. Then we'll strip down and start to fight with them. We'll shout *gālīs* 'obscenities' in order to get some money. But if someone gives us respect, touches our feet, and lets us sit down with him, even if he gives us less money than the others, we won't fuss about it. If someone gives us respect we'll leave him alone. If someone doesn't give us respect, we'll fight with him like crazy. (personal communication, Sulekha, Spring 1993, my translation)

Throughout the passage, Sulekha identifies the hijras' linguistic behavior with a variety of different verbs, among them *gālī denā* 'to utter obscenities, swear,' *sarāpnā* 'to curse,' *kosnā* 'to wish someone evil,' and *kaṭnā* 'to cut someone down to size'.²⁶ It is significant, however, that she consistently uses the Hindi term *sarāp dena* 'to curse' (with an initial alveolar [s] as in 'sip') instead of the more traditional *sarāp dena* (with an initial palatal [ś] as in 'ship'), distinguishing the former from the latter as a matter of referential perspective. The term *sarāp* differs from its Sanskrit counterpart *śarāp* in that it is associated with the powerless as opposed to the elite; while a *śarāp* is given by saints and those in power, a *sarāp* is considered to be an instrument of the poor, uttered by people who are otherwise helpless, such as widows, outcasts, or, in this case, hijras. Although both terms mean 'to curse' or 'to imprecate,' *śarāps*, according to Sulekha, are uttered by people in respected positions as a means of maintaining the social hierarchy, while *sarāps* are uttered by the marginalized as a means of fighting against it. Forced to live on the outskirts of Banaras both socially and spatially, Sulekha and her fellow hijras employ *sarāps* (i.e., curses used by those in inferior positions) in an effort to save face in a society that has, in her own words, unmasked them. When offered inadequate payment for their song and dance performances, a gesture that the hijras interpret as disrespectful, they shame their clients with a series of verbal abuses that quickly escalate from mild to severe. And if the most severe of these abuses also fails to bring the expected reward, the more aggressive members of the group will threaten to lift up their saris and expose their genitals, a practice that has been associated with the hijra community for well over a century (cf. Goldsmid 1836, as reported in Preston 1987; Bhimbai 1901; Russel, Bahadur, and Lal 1916). The hijras, as interlocutors without *śarm*, are uniquely skilled in the art of ridicule and insult, their curses winning them financial—and, indeed, a certain kind of social—respect. (I should add that, in the passage just quoted, Sulekha uses the expression *naṅgā honā* 'to become naked,' which can be interpreted both figuratively as 'to become shameless' and literally as 'to expose oneself'.)

The "fighting" behavior Sulekha alludes to in the excerpt just quoted, which occurs both in and out of the birth celebrations, consists of the overt employment of *gālīs* 'verbal abuses,' as well the more subtle employment of semantically ambiguous puns, rife with sexual innuendo. The invective reproduced in the next excerpt serves as an example of the former. Shouted by a Banaras hijra to the owner of a tea shop who had made sarcastic reference to her promiscuity (Singh 1982: 33), its derogatory meaning is clear. What distinguishes this expression from the many other genres of *gālī*-giving in India is not so much the individual terms themselves but rather the concentration of these terms in a single utterance:²⁷

nāspīte, mue, harāmī ke jāe, terī bibī kuttā khāe, kalmunhe, khudā-kahar barsāe tujh par, randue!

(‘You worthless fool, good-for-nothing, son-of-a-bastard, may your wife be eaten by a dog, may you be dark-faced, may god shower calamities on you, you widower!’)

This series of invectives is, of course, not without some suggestion of sexuality. The phrase “may your wife be eaten by a dog” indirectly implies (1) that the addressee is not able to satisfy his wife sexually, (2) that the addressee’s wife is potentially unfaithful, and (3) that the addressee’s wife has no discrimination with respect to sexual partners. Similarly, although the common interpretation of *mue* is ‘one who is dead’ and therefore a ‘good-for-nothing’, the term is occasionally used to suggest impotence or emasculation. Finally, the term *randu* ‘widower’ suggests promiscuity, pointing up the instability between the Indian identities of ‘widower’ and ‘pimp’ (compare, for instance, the Hindi proverb *rāṇḍ to rāṇḍāpā kaṭ le, rāṇḍuve kātṅnā dē to* which translates roughly as ‘The widow would be true to her widowhood if only the widower would allow it’). But these are all familiar Hindi insults, and the sexual references they were founded upon are not necessarily salient to present-day users.

The hijra insults reproduced in Table 25-1, however, are performed in a manner quite different from those in this example. Like the ritualized insults identified for some gay male communities in the United States (Murray 1979), the hijras direct these sexualized insults to each other for reasons of solidarity. Yet this speech event differs from that reported for English-speaking gay males in that the hijras issue these slurs to each other *when in the presence of nonhijras*. There is a strong element of performance in this vituperative banter, as the hijras create scripted quarrels among themselves to shock and embarrass their eavesdropping bystanders. Indeed, some hijra communities have a special *thālī* ‘clap’ used expressly for signaling the onset of this discursive activity (referred to by ingroup members as *dedh tālī* ‘one-and-a-half clap’), which they perform by producing a ‘full clap’, where the palms are brought together with straight, spread, raised fingers, followed directly by an *ādhi tālī* ‘half clap’, where the palms are brought together in the same manner but no sound results (see Hall 1995). When one of the hijras gives this signal, the uninitiated nonhijra becomes witness to a rowdy display of put-downs that demand a highly sexualized interpretation.

Representative of what Singh (1982) calls the hijras’ *asīl evaṃ dvīarthī bhāṣā* ‘obscene and double-meaning language’, these expressions contain words that, with the exception of the vocative *mue* ‘good-for-nothing’, are inherently inoffensive when uttered alone. The majority of these insults, as in the first five examples reproduced in Table 25-1, involve an extended metaphor of the marketplace: the buying and selling of fruits and vegetables, the exchange of wares, the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of voracious customers. The bazaar is one of the most public sites in the community and is traditionally a man’s domain. The sociomoral geography of the community is such that the bazaar is off limits to “respectable” women, as illustrated by the existence of the Hindi term *bāzārū aurat* ‘market woman’, which translates variously as ‘loose woman,’ ‘woman of low morals,’ ‘woman who has no shame,’ even ‘prostitute.’ Hijras often supplement the income

Table 25-1. Selected examples of hijra verbal insults

Expression used by the hijras	Literal translation into English
(a) khasam kā gannā cūs	'Go suck your husband's sugarcane!'
(b) khasam ke yār sāre bāzār ke kele cāṭ le, pet bhar jāyegā	'Husband's lover, go and lick all the bananas at the bazaar, <i>then</i> you'll get full.'
(c) pattal kuttā cāte hai, terā bhāī hai	'The dog who licks the leaf-plate is your brother' (i.e., 'You are just like a dog who eats other people's leftovers').
(d) thūktā jā aur laddū khātā jā, muc	'Keep on spitting and eating <i>laddū</i> (ball-shaped sweets), you good-for-nothing'.
(e) lakrī bec lakrī	'Sell that stick!' (Singh 1982 glosses this expression as follows: "In other words, the addressee should open up a store for selling his private parts").
(f) gilās mē pānī bharkar soyā rah, muc	'Fill the glass with water and go to sleep, you good-for-nothing'.
(g) terī saut ko kutte kā bāp rakhe thā. tab to kuch na bolā. ab ṭirr ṭirr kare hai.	'When that father-of-a-dog kept your co-wife you never said a word. <u>Now</u> you're complaining?'

Source: Singh (1982)(recorded in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh).

that they receive from public performances at births and weddings by servicing men sexually in secret, despite popular perceptions of the eunuch as a sexless ascetic. The metaphors employed here by the hijras about the bazaar are meant to be understood ambiguously in sexual terms. These images—which, of course, carry euphemistic reference to male genitalia, as in the case of *gannā* 'sugarcane', *kele* 'bananas', *laddū* 'sweets', and *lakrī* 'stick'—highlight the hijra's own knowledge about the closed and open spaces of the social geography. By referring to secret domains, in this case the male body and indirectly prostitution, the hijras embarrass their male listeners and shamelessly collapse traditional divisions of the secret and the known, private and public, home and market, feminine and masculine.

At this point it would be appropriate again to consider Rupa's comment that the hijras "even give curses like women." After insisting that hijras always speak like women when together, Rupa asserts in the next excerpt that they additionally refrain from using those curses that involve insulting reference to the addressee's mother or sister. These kinds of curses, she explains, are *mardānā* 'manly' curses and oppose the more feminine variety of curses used by women:

gālī bhī dēgī, to aurat jaisā. (7.0) mardānā gālī nahī dete haī hijrā. - auratō jaisā. auratō jaisā dete haī. (2.0) abhī nahī kahēngī "terī mā ki, terī bahan ki," nahī kahēngī, - ye gālī nahī dēngī. - ye gālī nahī dēngī. jaise chinrī, bucrī, ganjī, kanjī, ye sab banaēgī auratō ki tarah. (3.0) mardānā log kahte haī, "terī mā kī, terī bahan kī, - bhosrī vāle, ye- vo- cottā, sālā," (1.0) uṭāēgī vo nahī.

(We'll even give curses like women. Hijras don't give *mardānā* curses; they curse like women. Like women. We won't say "terī mā kī [your mother's . . .], terī bahan kī [your

sister's . . .], we won't say them. We won't give these curses. We won't give these curses. [We'll say,] for example, "*chinri* [loose one], *bucrī* [earless one], *ganji* [hairless one], *kanjri* [low-caste loose woman]," we'll form all of these in the same way that women do. *Mardānā* people give curses like "*teri mā ki* [your mother's...], *teri bahan ki* [your sister's . . .], *bhosri vāle* [vagina-owner], *cottā* [thief], *sālā* [wife's brother]." We won't say those.)

In Hindi-speaking Banaras, the genre sometimes referred to as *mardānā gāli* 'men's curses' is thought to involve mention of sexual violence to women, in opposition to 'women's curses' that generally only wish the hearer ill. The curses that Rupa identifies as *teri mā ki* 'your mother's. . .', *teri bahan ki* 'your sister's. . .', and *sālā* 'brother-in-law' are known in Hindi as *mā-bahan ki gāli* 'mother and sister curses', and because the speaker who utters them asserts his own sexual prowess with respect to the addressee's female relatives, women do not tend to use them. Oddly enough, these are precisely the terms that Verma (1971) claims are used by impotent men to make themselves seem more potent to the rest of society, a facade that is clearly meaningless to hijras, who collectively identify as nonmasculine. Even in the structure of their curses, according to Sulekha, the hijras assert their identity as feminine, employing "softer" curses that focus on either physical defect or sexual immorality, such as *chinri* 'loose one', *bucrī* 'earless one', *ganji* 'hairless one', and *kanjri* 'low-caste loose woman'.

Yet in contrast to Rupa's claims, the hijras in Banaras do in fact employ *mardānā* curses in everyday conversation, as evidenced by Shashi's angry employments of the term *mādar cod* 'mother fucker' in reference to her birth parents. Shashi, now a seventy-eight-year-old guru of a small hijra community in Banaras, ran away from home at the age of seven and joined a troupe of *bāī*, women dancers who are often perceived to be prostitutes: "I renounced my mother; I renounced my father; I renounced everybody!" But what was initially grief later turned into contempt, and Shashi, adamant about the notion that hijras have no ties to the world of men and women, whether of caste, class, or religion, blasphemes her own parents:

As far as I'm concerned, my mother and father were all cremated on *Manikarnikā*. I cremated them. I hit them four times with a stick and then I let their ashes flow down the Ganges river. I said, "You *mādar cod* 'mother fuckers' flow down the river! Don't ever show your face here again! If you come to my little town, I'll beat the hell out of you!"

Moreover, one of the hijras' favorite in-group insults is the term *bhosri vālā* 'vagina-owner', an epithet so offensive to middle-class Hindi speakers that the Banaras resident who typed my transcripts refused to include this word, typing an ellipsis in its place. When used among nonhijras, the term is generally used between men and implies that the referent, although male, has somehow been demasculinized. The epithet is used differently from the American insult *cunt*, then; for one, *bhosri vālā* is itself grammatically masculine and its referent must be so as well (the feminine counterpart *bhosri vāli* does not exist in contemporary usage²⁸). When used among hijras, the insult lies not in the accusation of demasculation, since the very definition of *hijra* depends on the notion of impotence, but in the

suggestion of maleness. In the next two excerpts, Sulekha recreates two different scenarios in which the term might be used among ingroup members, and while she clearly considers both uses somewhat humorous in retrospect, she nevertheless indicates that the accusation is a serious one. In both narratives, Sulekha illustrates how the term is used as both an attention-getting device and a means of expressing anger: in the first example it is used to convince her friend Megha to go to the movies with her, and in the second example it is used to reprimand initiates for speaking like men instead of women:

puling bhī hotā hai. bāt karne mē, jaise Megha se hamārā bāt hotā hai, “Megha suno, calogī nahī kā sinemā mere sāth? cal sinemā dēkhe. cal nahī Megha. (1.5) E! na calbe kare, bhosrī vālā!” ((laughs)) (4.0) gussā mē ho jātā hai, is tarah mazāk mē ho jātā hai. “are sun re!” is tarah ke ho jātā hai.

The masculine occurs, too. For example, if I’m talking with Megha, [it’s], “Megha, listen! Won’t you come with me to the movies? C’mon, let’s go see a movie. Won’t you come on, Megha? (1.5) Hey! Won’t you come on? The *bhosrī vālā* [vagina-owner]!” ((laughs)) It happens when we’re angry. And it also happens when we’re joking. “Hey, listen to me!” We’ll use it like that.

sikhāyā nahī jātā hai. - anubhāv ho jātā hai. - dekhkar ke, - koī baccā to nahī hai, usko sikhlayā jāyegā. . . . kaise kar rahe hai, - is tarah hamko bhī karnā cāhiye. - nahī karēge to hijrā log hamko hansegā. - to kahegā ki “are barī kuḍhaṅgā hai, barī battamīz hai.” ((laughs)) hā. - “apne man se kah rahā hai bhosrī vālā” ((laughs)) sab mārne uth jātā hai cappel se. ((3.0)) hūā. (5.0) dekhte dekhte ādat par jātā hai, - tab vaisā svabhāv ho jātā hai.

It’s not taught. It’s experienced, by watching. After all, he’s not a child who needs to be taught. . . . [The new hijra will say,] “I should also act just like they’re acting. If I don’t, hijra people will laugh at me.” [The hijra people] will say, “Oh, he’s very ill-mannered! He’s very ill-behaved.” ((laughs)) Yes! “He’s just saying whatever comes to mind, the *bhosrī vālā* [vagina-owner]!” ((laughs)) Then everybody will get up to beat him with their sandals. ((laughs)) Really! So gradually, after watching for a long time, it becomes a habit. Then it just becomes his nature.

The older hijras’ employment of the masculine-marked epithet in the second example is particularly telling, as it reflects their dissatisfaction with the initiate’s attempts at discursive femininity. Refusing to grant the initiate the feminine reference so expected within the community (see Hall and O’Donovan 1996), the more experienced hijra veterans refer to the “ill-behaved” initiate with masculine-marked verb and noun phrases. Their use of the epithet *vagina-owner^m*, in this context, ironically implies that the addressee is acting too “masculine,” a behavior that merits retribution in a community that wishes to distance itself from male representations. The initiate is categorized, in essence, as a vagina-owning want-to-be, the grammatically masculine *bhosrī vālā^m* being used to betray her essential (i.e., anatomical) masculinity.

As with the term *bhosrī vālā*, the ingroup examples recorded in Table 25-1

also carry an overt and, I would argue, deliberate confusion of feminine and masculine reference. The authors of expressions (d) and (f) address their fellow hijras not with the feminine *muī* but with the masculine *mue*, a term that is itself generally thought of as a "soft curse" used primarily by women. The first six of these examples point to the addressee's insatiable sexual appetite, which in (a) can be satisfied only through size (i.e., sugarcane), in (b), (c), (d), and (e) only through quantity (i.e., the bananas at the bazaar, regular supplements of sweets, leftover leaf-plates, a store of stick-buying customers), and in (f) only through pacification (i.e., a cold glass of water at bedtime). Yet while the first four examples attribute an aggressive femininity to the hijra addressee, placing her squarely in the feminized role as the husband's lover or wife, examples (e) and (f) highlight the addressee's masculinity and point disdainfully to her machismo, referring to her insatiable *lakri* 'stick' on the one hand and her need to subdue an erection on the other. The final insult reproduced in (g) again points to the addressee's femininity, criticizing her for passively allowing her male lover to take a co-wife.

Conclusion

With these verbal shifts of perspective, the hijras who participate in this insulting banter are able to challenge dominant cartographies of gender and sexuality. In order to make any sense of the hijra's seemingly innocuous and nonsensical utterance, the passer-by must enter into what he believes to be the hijra's frame of reference, a linguistic space involving sexual innuendo, crudity, and gender fluidity. Yet by doing so, the hearer must also admit to himself that he in many ways inhabits that same space. Through this verbal play, then, the hijras, who have a precarious status in the Indian social matrix, are able to compensate for their own lack of social prestige by assuming linguistic control of the immediate interaction, creating alternative sociosexual spaces in a dichotomously gendered geography.

For the hijra, who either is born an intersexed infant or undergoes castration in order to adopt the hijra lifestyle, it is the body itself that determines her ambiguously situated linguistic position, a body that has been interpreted as something outside and therefore inferior to the female/male dichotomy. Because the hijras have a kind of between-sex status in contemporary India, their very existence serves as a theoretical challenge to previous characterizations of women's speech and men's speech as discursive styles indexically derived from the sex of the speaker. The hijras, liminal to the world of women and men, have a privileged position with respect to the linguistic gender system, their experiences on either side of the gender divide allowing for strategies of expression unavailable to the monosexed individual. Indeed, the hijras collectively exploit their liminality, subverting the linguistic ideologies associated with both femininity and masculinity in order to survive in a hostile world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS I would like to thank Veronica O'Donovan for her help in Banaras, Ved Prakash Vatuk for his wisdom in Berkeley, and Anna Livia for her

comments in San Diego. Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to the hijras I met in 1993, who are the best cursers I know.

NOTES

1. The correct English spelling for the Hindi *हिजड़ा*, according to the transliteration conventions adopted throughout the remainder of this chapter, would be *hijrā*; I have chosen to use the spelling *hijra*, however, for easier reading. (Throughout this chapter, I use the transliteration system adopted by Snell and Weightman 1989: 7).

2. As I remark in a previous article on the hijras' alternating uses of feminine- and masculine-marked verb phrases (Hall and O'Donovan 1996), the choice of terminology used to identify the hijras in Indian, European, and American scholarship merits a full article in its own right. While contemporary sociologists and journalists who live in India and write in English generally refer to the hijras as "eunuchs" (e.g., Bobb and Patel 1982; Allahbadia and Shah 1992; Lakshmi and Kumar 1994; Mitra 1983, 1984; Mohan 1979; Mondal 1989; Patel 1983, 1988; Raghuramaiah 1991; Sayani 1986; Sethi 1970; Sharma 1984; Shetty 1990; Sinha 1967; Vyas and Shingala 1987), European and American researchers refer to them variously as "transvestites" (e.g., Freeman 1979; Preston 1987; Ross 1968), "an institutionalized third gender role" (Bullough and Bullough 1993; Nanda 1985, 1990), "hermaphrodites" (Opler 1960; Ross 1969), "passive homosexuals" (Carstairs 1956), and "male prostitutes" (Carstairs 1956). The inconsistency of these translations underscores the inherent difficulty of translating the concept *hijrā* into Western scholarship. Other English terms besides *eunuch* that are occasionally employed by South Asian writers are "abominable aberrations" (Raghuramaiah 1991), "ambiguous sex" (Mohan 1979), "hermaphrodites" (Mohan 1979; Pimpley and Sharma 1985; Sethi 1970; Singh 1956; Srinivas 1976), "castrated human male" (Mohan 1979), "hermaphrodite prostitutes" (Sanghvi 1984), "labelled deviants" (Sharma 1989), "male-homosexual transvestites" (Rao 1955), "sex-perverted male, castrated or uncastrated" (Sinha 1967), "sexo-aesthetic inverts coupled with homosexual habits" (Sinha 1967), "sexual inverts," "sexual perverts" (Rao 1955), and "third sex" (Mondal 1989).

3. The Indian Railway often gives discounts to citizens who are traveling to national meetings; those traveling to and from All-India conferences, for instance, are routinely given a 50 percent discount on train fares.

4. Estimates on the number of hijras living in India during the past decade vary significantly, ranging from 50,000 (Bobb and Patel 1982), through 200,000 (Associated Press 1994) through 500,000 (*Tribune* 1983, referring to both India and Pakistan), through 1.1 million (Sharma 1989, quoting Bhola, president of the All-India Hijra Welfare Society) to 1.2 million (*Hindustan Times* 1994; Shrivastav 1986, quoting Bhola, president of the All-India Hijra Welfare Society). I have chosen the latter estimate, as it is most consistent with the results of my own fieldwork in North India.

5. This information was provided by Khairati Lal Bhola, the chairman of the Akhil Bhārtiy Hijrā Kalyān Sabhā (The All-India Hijra Welfare Society) in a public interview on 13 October, 1986. The article reporting this information, authored by V. K. Shrivastav and titled "Hijrō Kī Alag Duniyā, Dhan Kamāne Kā Kutsit Dhandhā" (The Separate world of the eunuchs: A vile profession for earning money), is highly inflammatory, asserting that older hijra gurus kidnap innocent bystanders and trick them into undergoing castration.

6. Other terms used in reference to the hijras since the mid-1800s include *khunsā*, *khasua*, *fātādā*, and *mukhanna*.

7. Burton also explains in his article "How to Deal with the Slave Scandal in Egypt" (recorded in Wright 1906, v. 2, 195–210) that castration increased the value of the slave by anywhere from five to eighty pounds, depending on the age of the boy in question.

8. Ayres (1992) and Preston (1987) attribute this loss of status to British colonialists, who launched moral and political campaigns against the hijras during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

9. This passage points to an additional association of the eunuch with physical cruelty, which probably developed in response to the fact that they were often assigned the unpleasant task of inflicting royal punishments on offending persons. The eunuchs' penchant for physical cruelty was recorded even in the nineteenth century; William Knighton, for instance, comments that they carried out this task with "*gusto* and appetite": "Whether it was that I felt an antipathy to the class, or was prejudiced against them by the accounts I heard, I can not now tell; but my impression is, that the greater part of the cruelty practised in the native harems is to be attributed to the influence and suggestions of the eunuchs. They were usually the inflictors of punishment on the delinquents; and this punishment, whether flogging or torturing, they seemed to inflict with a certain degree of *gusto* and appetite for the employment" (1855: 161).

10. True hermaphrodites (or those thought to be so) were apparently considered more deserving of respect than castrated hijras, and so Edward Balfour's *Enclopaedia Asiatica* defines *khoja* as a "corruption of Khaja, a respectable man, a respectable term for a eunuch," apparently in opposition to terms that were perhaps not so "respectable" (1976, v.5, 564). John Shortt (1873: 404), however, reverses the semantics of *hijra* and *khoja* in his article on the "kojahs" of southern India (which is later quoted extensively by Thurston 1901 in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*) and identifies the "artificially created" eunuch as *kojah* and the "natural" eunuch as *hijra*. Ibbetson, MacLagan, and Rose (1911, v. 2, 331) delineate the linguistic distinction between court eunuchs and hijras as follows: "a eunuch, also called *khunsá*, *khojá*, *khusrá*, *mukhannas*, or, if a dancing eunuch dressed in woman's clothes, *zankhá*. Formerly employed by chiefs and people of rank to acts as custodians of their female apartments and known as *khwaja-sará*, *nawáb* or *názir*, they are still found in Rájputána in this capacity. In the Punjab the *hijra* is usually a *deradár*, i.e., attached to a *dera*." W. Crooke (1896: 495) identifies the term *khoja* (or rather, "khwája") as a Muslim subclass of *hijra*, a distinction that further points to an association of the *khoja* with Muslim courts.

11. "They go about the bazaars in groups of half-a-dozen or more singing songs with the hope of receiving a trifle. They are not only persistent but impudent beggars, rude and vulgar in the extreme, singing filthy, obscene, and abusive songs to compel the bazaarmen to give them something. Should they not succeed they would create a fire and throw in a lot of chillies, the suffocating and irritative smoke producing violent coughing, etc., so that the bazaarmen are compelled to yield to their importunity and give them a trifle to get rid of their annoyance, as they are not only unable to retain their seats in the bazaars, but customers are prevented from coming to them in consequence. With the *douceur* they get they will move off to the next bazaar to resume the trick" (Shortt 1873: 406).

12. "At Ahmedabad not only the Hijdás but some of the Bhawayyás, or strolling players, claim presents on the birth of a boy with a pertinacity that is not satisfied till the whole of their demand is paid. The person claiming the gift is generally the clown or fool of the troop. He does not dance or sing, but by his obstreperous sallies of witty abuse tries to make

his stay so annoying that to get rid of him no expense is thought to great. To avoid the nuisance some people satisfy his demands at his house by going and making a present of one or two shillings" (Lutfullah 1875: 95).

13. This turn of phrase is repeated verbatim by R. V. Russel, Rai Bahadur, and Hira Lal: "The hijras [artificial eunuchs] are beggars like the Khasuas [natural eunuchs], and sometimes become very importunate. Soon after the birth of a child in Gujarāt, the hated Hijras or eunuchs crowd round the house for gifts. If the demand of one of them is refused the whole rank and file of the local fraternity besiege the house with indecent clamour and gesture" (1916: 209). K. Bhimbai similarly comments on the hijras' abusive techniques: "In begging they stand in front of some villager, clap their hands, and offer him the usual blessing, 'May Mother Bahucharāji do you and your children good' or 'Ado Bhavāni,' that is 'Rise goddess Bhavāni.' If anyone fails to give them alms they abuse him and if abuse fails they strip themselves naked, a result which is greatly dreaded as it is believed to bring dire calamity" (1901: 507).

14. The existence of this book was pointed out by Rupa, the only hijra I spoke with who had learned to read and write. Unlike other hijras in Banaras, Rupa became a hijra at a very late age after receiving a childhood education. When showing this book to my research partner Veronica, Rupa enthusiastically explained that "everything you need to know about hijras will be in this book."

15. To preserve the hijras' anonymity, I have chosen pseudonyms for all of the hijras who appear in this article and have avoided giving the names of the four hijra communities I visited.

16. Naqvi and Mujtaba narrate the story as follows: "Hijras are appalled when they are ridiculed by 'normal' people. They maintain that such an attitude is not merely irrational, but sacrilegious. 'God has made us like this,' says one hijra. 'So if anyone ridicules me I swear at them.' When a hijra boarded a bus in Mazimabad, a young man clapped mockingly in imitation of the standard hijra practice. The hijra in turn proceeded to hurl the most vociferous abuses at the man, who was eventually forced to disembark from the bus in shame" (1992: 89).

17. The hermaphrodite, raised as a girl in an upper-class Muslim family in Pakistan, had undergone medical treatment in the United States in order to enhance his masculinity. In his application for asylum, he argued that if he returned to Pakistan as a man, his anatomy would be considered defective, and he would be forced to join the hijras against his will.

18. Mehta's decision to use the term *lewdness* in reference to the hijras is clearly influenced by their exhibitionism as well. He later remarks, "I once saw four handsome Pavaiyā youth about 20 years old expose their backsides in the most crowded locality of Bhadra in Ahmedabad." As with Manucci and Bernier in their descriptions of the court eunuchs, however, Mehta also notes the hijra's faithful and trustworthy nature: "But on the whole the Pavaiyas have the reputation of being particularly honest, loyal, reliable and incapable of betrayal. Their life is simple, their wants are simple, and they have no wife and children to worry about. It is an account of this well-known trait of honesty that they flourish as sellers of milk, because it is believed that they would not adulterate it. Usually their instinctive behaviour and mode of thought is masculine" (1945–1946: 51).

19. I should add that Verma also asserts that women have their own verbal strategies for indicating "sex-superiority," namely, what he refers to as "pleading innocent" (1971: 85).

Regarding women who claim to be victims of rape, he argues: "It is for her own good that she denies having felt any pleasure, even if she has actually felt it. It is in her interest to declare that the entire act was loathsome to her and that she had been forced to submit. Therefore, pleading innocent, she demands all those rights which the society gives to a respectable woman" (85).

20. I am grateful to Ved Vatak for bringing this novel to my attention.

21. In Ayres's own words: "People tend to casually employ the word *hijra* in jest to describe rather effeminate men who appear to dress and identify as men but perhaps associate with hijras" (1992: 8).

22. The full passage is narrated as follows:

Freddy could feel an angry vein throb in his forehead. He was furious and horrified that a son of his should write such emasculated gibberish. As for poetry, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" he could tolerate, but this!

In a cold rage, he scribbled beneath the last line of the poem: "If you must think and act like a eunuch, why don't you wear your sister's bangles? And don't tear pages from your notebook!"

He tucked the notepaper into a fresh envelope and addressed it to Yazdi. (Sidhwa 1992: 146)

23. The transcription conventions I have used in the transliterated Hindi passages are adapted from Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984: ix-xvi); they include the notable additions of a superscripted *f* or *m* to designate feminine and masculine morphological marking. (I have not used these conventions in the English translations, since extralinguistic features like intonation and emphasis are not parallel.) Other transcription conventions include the following:

- (0.4) indicates length of pause within and between utterances, timed in tenths of a second
- a - a a hyphen with spaces before and after indicates a short pause, less than 0.2 seconds
- but- a hyphen immediately following a letter indicates an abrupt cutoff in speaking (i.e., interruption or self-interruption)
- (()) double parentheses enclose nonverbal movements and extralinguistic commentary
- () single parentheses enclose words which are not clearly audible (i.e., best guesses)
- [] brackets enclose words added to clarify the meaning of the text
- what underlining indicates syllabic stress
- CAPS small caps indicate louder or shouted talk
- : a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound (the more colons, the longer the sound)
- . a period indicates falling intonation
- , a comma indicates continuing intonation
- ? a question mark indicates rising intonation at the end of a syllable or word
- ... deletion of some portion of the original text
- "a" quotation marks enclose quoted or reported speech

24. The complete text of Vatak's poem is as follows (my translation):

Today I saw Jesus dying.
 Every inch of his body was pierced by nails.
 I saw all of India seething with pain,
 lying in a cot in the shape of an old man.

Onlookers are making noises all around the dying man,
 pointing their bayonets toward him.
 He's a fascist. Beware of him.
 He can overturn the the government with his disarmed hands.
 Every breath of truth is poisonous.
 I have seen it suffocated by the smoke of propaganda.
 I have seen non-violence being shot.
 The fire is going out,
 And all of India is locking the doors of their houses,
 lest a flame engulf them.
 I have seen today how, like vultures,
 people eat up their own father raw.
 I have seen on the fires of the cowards
 a dying bravery
 and a frightened witch trying to perform magical rites from afar.
 Today I have seen my history being buried
 and over its grave
 I have seen dancing
 550 million hijras.

25. Nanda also discusses how the hijras exploit their shamelessness for financial gain, drawing the important conclusion that “this stigma functions as an effective strategy of economic adaptation” (1990: 51).

26. The verbs *sarāpnā* and *kosnā* are very close in meaning, except that the former activity is generally associated with nonverbal cursing and the latter with verbal cursing (e.g., “May your two sons die tomorrow!”). The verbal activity subsumed under the verb *kosnā* is stereotypically associated with women instead of men.

27. See Raheja and Gold (1994) for an engaging discussion of research on women’s insult traditions in North India.

28. Ved Prakash Vatuk (personal communication) offers a succinct explanation as to why this curse is never used in reference to a woman: “A woman already has one, so why would it be a curse to tell her so?”

REFERENCES

- Allahbadia, Gautam N., and Nilesh Shah (1992). “India: Begging Eunuchs of Bombay.” *Lancet* 339, no. 8784: 48–49.
- Armstrong, James D. (this volume). “Homophobic Slang as Coercive Discourse among College Students.”
- Ayres, Alyssa (1992). *A scandalous breach of public decency. . . “Defining the decent: Indian hijras in the 19th and 20th centuries.* Honors Essay. Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Radcliffe College, April 1992.
- Balfour, Edward ([1858]1976). “Khoja.” *Encyclopaedia Asiatica*, vol. 5. New Delhi: Cosmo, p. 564.
- Balse, Mayah (1976). *The Indian Female: Attitude Toward Sex.* New Delhi: Chetana.
- Bernier, Francois (1891). *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656–1668*, trans. Archibald Constable. Westminster: A. Constable.

- Bhimbhai, K. (1901). "Paváyás in Gujarat Population, Hindus." *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. 9, pt. 1. Bombay: Government Central Press, pp. 506–508.
- Bobb, Dilip, and C. J. Patel (1982). "Eunuchs: Fear Is the Key." *India Today*, 15 September, pp. 84–85.
- Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough (1993). *Cross-Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Burton, Richard Francis (1886–1888). *Supplemental Nights to the Book of the Thousand and One Nights and a Night. With Notes Anthropological and Explanatory by Richard F. Burton*, 6 vols. Printed by the Burton Societ (for private subscribers only).
- Carstairs, George Morrison (1956). "Hinjra and Jiryān: Two Derivatives of Hindu Attitudes to Sexuality." *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 29: 128–138.
- Claiborne, William (1983). "India's Eunuchs Have Fallen in Esteem." *Washington Post*, 7 August, p. 14.
- Crooke, W. (1896). "Hijra, Mukhannās." *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, vol. 2. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, pp. 495–497.
- Ebden, H. (1855). "A Few Notes, with Reference to 'the Eunuchs,' to Be Found in the Large Households of the State of Rajpootana." *Indian Annals of Medical Science* 3: 520–525.
- Faridi, Khan Bahadur Fazalullah Lutfullah (1899). "Híjdás in Gujarat Population, Musalmāns." *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. 9, pt. 2. Bombay: Government Central Press, pp. 21–22.
- Freeman, James M. (1977). "Rites of Obscenity: Chariot Songs of Eastern India." *Journal of Popular Culture* 10, no. 4: pp. 882–896.
- Freeman, James M. (1979). "Transvestites and Prostitutes, 1969–72." In *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 294–315.
- Gaudio, Rudolph P. (this volume): "Not Talking Straight in Hausa."
- Hall, Kira (1995). "Hijralect." *Hijra/Hjirin: Language and Gender Identity*. Ph.D. Diss., Department of Linguistics, University of California at Berkeley.
- Hall, Kira, and Veronica O'Donovan (1996). "Shifting Gender Positions among Hindi-Speaking Hijras." In Victoria Bergvall, Janet Bing, and Alice Freed (eds.), *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*. London: Longman.
- Henry, Edward O. (1976). "Vindicating Gali Songs: Insult Songs Which Promote Social Cohesion." *Journal of Social Research* 19, no. 1: 1–13.
- Hindustan Times* (1994). 7 November.
- Ibbetson, D. C. J., M. E. MacLagan, and H. A. Rose (1911). "Hijra." *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Panjab and North-West Frontier Province*, vol. 2. Lahore, Pakistan: Civil and Military Gazette Press, pp. 331–333.
- Karant, Kota Shivarama (1984). *Mukajji: Eka Atindriya Kathaloka*. New Delhi: Bhārtiya Jñānpath.
- Knighton, William (1855). *The Private Life of an Eastern King. By a Member of the Household of His Late Majesty, Nussir-u-Deen, king of Oude*. New York: Redfield.
- Lakshmi, N., and A. Gururaj Kumar (1994). "HIV Seroprevalence among Eunuchs." *Genitourinary Medicine* 70, no. 1: 71–72.
- Lutfullāh, Fazl (1875). *Gujarāt Musalmāns; Written for the Bombay Gazetteer*. Bombay: Government Central Press, pp. 95–98.
- Lynnton, Harriet Ronken, and Mohini Rajan (1974). "The Unworldly Ones: The Hijras." *The Days of the Beloved*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 190–206.
- Manucci, Niccolao (1907). *Mogul India, 1653–1708*, vols. 1–4, trans. William Irvine. London: John Murray.

- Mehta, Sumant (1945–1946). "Eunuchs, Pavaiyās, and Hijadās." *Gujarat Sabitya Sabha*, Part 2: 3–75.
- Mitra, Nirmal (1983). "The Making of a 'Hijra.'" *Onlooker*, 18 February, pp. 14–25.
- (1984). "Bahuchara Mata and Her Rooster." *India Magazine*, April, pp. 44–53.
- Mohan, Chander (1979). "The Ambiguous Sex on the War-Path." *Hindustan Times Weekly Sunday*, 26 August, p. i.
- Mondal, Sekh Rahim (1989). "The Eunuchs: Some Observations." *Journal of Indian Anthropology and Sociology* 24: 244–250.
- Murray, Stephen O. (1979). "The Art of Gay Insulting." *Anthropological Linguistics* 21: 211–223.
- Nanda, Serena (1985). "The Hijras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalized Third Gender Role." *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, no. 3–4: 35–54.
- Nanda, Serena (1990). *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Nanda, Serena (1992). "The Third Gender: Hijra Community in India." *Manushi* 72: 9–16.
- Naqvi, Nauman, and Hasan Mujtaba (1992). "Neither Man nor Woman." *Newsline*, December, pp. 80–89.
- New Orleans Times Picayune* (1994). "India's Eunuchs Marry Mythical Demigod," 28 April.
- Opler, Morris E. (1960). "The Hajarā (Hermaphrodites) of India and Indian National Character: A Rejoinder." *American Anthropologist* 62: 505–511.
- Patel, Haribhai G. (1983). "The Hijada (Eunuch) Culture-Complex: Urgent Research Needs." *Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological and Ethnological Research* 25: 121–126.
- (1988). "Human Castration: A Study of Hijada (Eunuch) Community of Gujarat in India." *Man and Life* 14, no. 1–2: 67–76.
- Patwardhan, Anand (1994). *Father, Son, and Holy War*. Documentary film.
- Pimpley, P. N., and S. K. Sharma (1985). "Hijaras: A Study of an Atypical Role." *Avadh Journal of Social Sciences* 2: 41–50.
- Preston, Laurence W. (1987). "A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth-Century India." *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 2: 371–387.
- Raghuramaiah, K. Lakshmi (1991). *Night Birds: Indian Prostitutes from Devadasis to Call Girls*. Delhi: Chanakya.
- Raheja, Gloria Goodwin, and Ann Grodzins Gold (1994). *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rao, I. Bhooshana (1955). "Male Homosexual Transvestism: A Social Menace." *Antiseptic* 52: 519–524.
- Rawlinson, Hugh George (1952). *India: A Short Cultural History*. London: Cresset.
- Ross, Allen V. (1969). *Vice in Bombay*. London: Tallis Press.
- Russell, R. V., Rai Bahadur, and Hira Lal (1916). "Hijra, Khasua." *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol. 3. London: Macmillan, pp. 206–212.
- Salefore, Rajaram Narayan (1974). *Sex Life under Indian Rulers*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books.
- (1978). *Sex in Indian Harem Life*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks.
- Sanghvi, Malavika (1984). "Walking the Wild Side." *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 11 March, pp. 25–28.
- Sayani, Sanjay A. (1986). "Understanding the Third Sex" [Interview with Siddharth Shah]. *Sunday Observer*, 9 November, p. 14.
- Sethi, Patanjali (1970). "The Hijras." *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 13 December, pp. 40–45.

- Shani (1984). "Sāre Dukhiyā Jamnā Pār." *Ek śabar mē sabne bikte haī*. Delhi: National Publishing House.
- Sharma, Satish Kumar (1984). "Eunuchs: Past and Present." *Eastern Anthropologist* 37, no. 4: 381–389.
- (1989). *Hijras: The Labelled Deviants*. New Delhi: Gian.
- Shetty, Kavitha (1990). "Eunuchs: A Bawdy Festival." *India Today*, 15 June, 50–55.
- Shortt, John (1873). "The Kojahs of Southern India." *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 2: 402–407.
- Shrivastav, V. K. (1986). "Hijrō Kī Alag Duniyā, Dhan Kamāne Kā Kutsit Dhandhā." Source unknown.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi (1992). *The Crow Eaters*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
- Singh, Govind (1982). *Hijrō Kā Sansār*. Delhi: Anupam Books.
- Singh, Khushwant (1956). *Mano Majra*. New York: Grove Press.
- (1989). *Delhi*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin Books.
- Sinha, A. P. (1967). "Procreation among the Eunuchs." *Eastern Anthropologist* 20, no. 2: 168–176.
- Snell, Rupert, and Simon Weightman (1989). *Hindi (Teach Yourself Books)*. Kent: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1942). *Marriage and Family in Mysore*. Bombay: New Book Co.
- (1976). *The Remembered Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thurston, Edgar (1909). "Khōjas." *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 3, Madras: Government Press, pp. 288–292.
- Times of India* (1979). "A National Get-Together of Eunuchs." 2 February, p. 5.
- Tribune* (1983). "5 Lakh Eunuchs in India, Pak." 26 August, p. 5.
- Tuli, Jitendra (1976). *The Indian Male: Attitude towards Sex*. New Delhi: Chetana.
- United States Department of State (1992). Letter to Director, Asylum Unit, Immigration and Naturalization Service, San Francisco, 6 July.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash (1969). "Let's Dig Up Some Dirt: The Idea of Humor in Children's Folklore in India." *Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Tokyo and Kyoto* 2: 274–277.
- (1977a). Maīne Āj Īsā Ko Marte Hue Dekhā. *Āpāt Shatak*. Minakshi Prakashan, pp. 79.
- (1977b). "Patā Nahī Kal Kyā Hogā." *Āpāt Shatak*. Minakshi Prakashan, pp. 43–44.
- (1985). Unpublished diary entry. Meerut, 30 January.
- (1987). "Hijrō Ki Tarah." Unpublished poem.
- (1995). "Yugadriṣṭā Maniṣiyō Kī Is Punyabhūmi Mē." Unpublished poem.
- Verma, Dayanad (1971). *An Intimate Study of Sex Behaviour*. New Delhi: Star Publications.
- Vyas, M. D., and Yogesh Shingala (1987). *The Life Style of the Eunuchs*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications.